



The Word Made Words: A Lutheran Perspective on the Authority and Use of the Scriptures

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AUTHORITY AND PURPOSE

“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.” (John 5:39)

The subject of biblical authority signals an important question: “Authority for what?” One who has authority is authorized to do something. A power of attorney, for example, conveys authority to act on behalf of another in legal and/or medical matters. A power of attorney does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of getting certain necessary things done.

“Authority for what?” carries with it a companion question: “Authority from whom?” The authority conveyed by a power of attorney derives from the one who signs it. The legitimate exercise of authority requires an authorizer.

The designation of the Bible as the “word of God” communicates the understanding that biblical authority derives from God as author and thereby also as authorizer. Biblical authority is a dynamic concept, not a static quality that adheres to a text in isolation. It embodies a constellation of relationships connecting the Triune God, the text, and those whom God addressed and addresses through the

The Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions link biblical authority to the immediate purpose of shaping Christian life and teaching and to the ultimate purpose of salvation through Christ. The Bible is the word of God in, with, and under human words, “the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies.”

text. The authority of the written word of God derives from the personal authority of God the Word and issues forth in authorized agency, that is, the spoken proclamation of the word of God for Christian faith and life.

Historically, Lutherans have shown less interest in talking *about* the Bible and its authority than in *using* the Bible authoritatively in preaching and teaching. While Martin Luther's lifework was to interpret and apply the Scriptures, he (unlike some other Reformers and subsequent Lutheran theologians) never wrote a distinct treatment of the Bible as a theological locus. Lutherans have not typically begun their confessions or theological treatises with statements about the nature and status of the Bible.¹ So to develop an authentically Lutheran understanding of biblical authority is less a matter of defining the Bible as an object of study and more a matter of considering how the Bible as the word of God functions to achieve God's purposes.

This functional or purposive understanding of biblical authority is itself biblically warranted. The passage most often cited in discussions of biblical authority is 2 Tim 3:14–17:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

While verse 16 is often truncated to serve as a proof-text for verbal inerrancy, the passage as a whole explicitly describes the inspiration of the Scriptures in terms of its purposes. The inspired Scriptures have *immediate* authority in the life of the believer: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for" the equipping of the faithful for Christian life and service (v. 16). The authority of the Scriptures is also linked to their *ultimate* purpose: to communicate the message of "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 15).²

The Lutheran Confessions also convey a functional or purposive attitude toward biblical authority. The only place where the Confessions specifically address the Scriptures in a distinct article is at the beginning of the *Formula of Concord*. As with the passage from 2 Timothy, the *Formula* emphasizes not the status of the Scriptures in themselves but their immediate use, namely, as the "only rule and guiding principle according to which all doctrines and teachers are to be evaluated."³ The bulk of the *Formula*'s "Summary, Rule, and Guiding Principle" section

¹Helmut Thielicke, for example, places his discussion of the Bible in the third (!) volume of his three-volume systematic theology, *The Evangelical Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); he begins this volume with the Holy Spirit and then moves on to discuss both the Bible and the church as vehicles through which the Spirit works.

²While New Testament references to "the scriptures" necessarily refer to the Old Testament, since neither the New Testament nor the Bible yet existed as a whole, the extension of the soteriological purpose of the Scriptures to encompass the New Testament as well as the Old for Christians is certainly warranted.

³*The Formula of Concord, Epitome 1*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 486. Hereafter cited as *FC* and *BC*.

is devoted not to the Scriptures themselves but to establishing the subsidiary value of other creeds and confessions, including the Lutheran Confessions themselves, as faithful “witnesses and explanations of the faith” presented in the Scriptures.⁴ This delineation of how scriptural authority functions in the churches of the Lutheran Reformation was especially important given the Council of Trent’s reassertion in 1546 of the equal authority of the Scriptures and the traditions of the church. The Confessions express the Lutheran Reformers’ rejection of the independent authority of tradition through their repeated use of Matt 15:9, “[I]n vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine,” which is the single most frequently quoted scriptural text in *The Book of Concord*.

The interpretive principle for determining faithful and correct explanations is made clear through the designation of the Scriptures as “the prophetic [i.e., pointing toward Christ] and apostolic [i.e., witnessing to Christ] writings of the Old and New Testaments.”⁵ Thus, the *immediate* function of judging doctrine is informed by the *ultimate* christological and soteriological orientation of the Scriptures. *The Book of Concord* cites 2 Tim 3:16 only three times, all in the *Formula of Concord* and always to refer to the reproofing, admonishing function of the Scriptures. Two of these three references occur in the article on election, where reproof and repentance are seen as preparatory to the ultimate purpose of the Scriptures: “to strengthen our faith and assure us of our salvation.”⁶ Given this soteriological understanding of the Scriptures and their purpose, the *Formula of Concord* even goes so far as to refer to Luther’s catechisms as “a Bible of the Laity, in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation.”⁷

“SCRIPTURE ALONE”

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

The confessional emphasis on the Scriptures as “the only rule and guiding principle” is reflective of the well-known Reformation slogan “*sola scriptura*.” Luther uses the phrase “Scripture alone” in two distinct senses. First, “Scripture alone” identifies the canonical Scriptures as a unique source of information: only the Scriptures tell certain stories and teach certain things. Second, “Scripture alone” functions in an oppositional way, to contrast Luther’s theological position with its alternative: it is Scripture alone, rather than any human teaching, that is the definitive authority for the church.

In identifying “Scripture alone” as the authoritative source of the church’s teaching, Luther rejects not only the claim that church tradition had equal and independent authority with the Scriptures, but also the claim that only the hierarchi-

⁴*FC*, Ep 8, in *BC*, 487.

⁵*FC*, Ep 1, in *BC*, 486.

⁶*FC*, *Solid Declaration* 11:12, in *BC*, 643.

⁷*FC*, Ep 5, in *BC*, 487.

cal church had the authority to interpret the Scriptures correctly. For Luther, the church's validation of scriptural teaching was unnecessary, because the Scriptures contain within them a clear and self-sufficient interpretive principle or norm. This center and interpretive principle is the good news of Jesus Christ, as Luther makes abundantly clear, claiming that "the gospel itself is our guide and instructor in the Scriptures,"⁸ because "all the scriptures point to Christ alone."⁹

"the Scriptures contain within them a clear and self-sufficient interpretive principle or norm—the good news of Jesus Christ"

An oppositional, corrective formulation is also characteristic of the other Reformation *solas*;¹⁰ each presents a distinct theological alternative to the prevailing medieval church teaching. What authorizes the church's work and the Christian's faith? "Scripture alone," not Scripture plus tradition. How are we saved? By "grace alone," not by grace perfecting human nature or compounding human merit. Through "faith alone," not through faith informed or supplemented by works of love. Because of "Christ alone," without reliance on the so-called merits of the saints.

The *solas* function holistically to convey the Lutheran understanding of the gospel. As noted in the common statement from the U.S. Lutheran–Catholic dialogue on Scripture and tradition, "For Lutherans *solus Christus* radically entails *sola gratia*, *sola fides*, and *sola scriptura*, all of which must be taken together as part of an integrated whole that proclaims how persons come to the salvation that God has appointed for them: only Scripture can make clear that it is Christ alone, by grace, through faith, who saves sinners."¹¹

"Scripture alone" is thus both a consequence of the gospel and also a safeguard of the gospel. Where philosophers, saints, or doctors of the church agree with the Scriptures, according to Luther, they can be useful tools for our understanding; but they have no independent authority in spiritual matters. Luther advises Christians to spend more time reading the Bible itself than commentaries, and Luther criticizes those who confuse primary and secondary texts: "Our dear fa-

⁸Martin Luther, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521), in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 35:123 (hereafter *LW*).

⁹Martin Luther, *Avoiding the Doctrines of Men* (1522), in *LW* 35:132.

¹⁰This may be, in part, a reflection of Luther's Occamist training at Erfurt, with its philosophical commitment to reducing claims to the simplest explanation necessary to account for the evidence ("Occam's Razor"). Luther also acknowledges the influence of common German usage, in which the word "alone" functions to add emphasis. In an open letter *On Translating* (1530), Luther defends himself against criticism that he has illegitimately inserted the word "alone" into the text of Rom 3:28 by pointing out: "It is the nature of the German language to add the word *allein* in order that the word *nicht* or *kein* may be clearer and more complete" (in *LW* 35:189).

¹¹*Scripture and Tradition: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, vol. 9, ed. Harold C. Skillrud, J. Francis Stafford, and Daniel F. Martensen (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995) 38. Note how closely this formulation echoes "out of grace for Christ's sake through faith," in *Augsburg Confession IV* (BC 36, 38).

thers wanted to lead us to the Scriptures by their writings, but we use their works to get away from the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the Scripture alone is our vineyard in which we must all labor and toil.”¹²

In rejecting human authority as an independent source of Christian teaching, Luther is not promoting a naïve biblicism. He does not exclude the legitimate use of reason and experience in interpreting the Scriptures. Luther’s appeal at the Diet of Worms in 1521 to “scripture or clear reason” is not an isolated instance but a recurring reference (ironically, one that Luther attributes to a letter of Augustine to Jerome). Luther does not acknowledge reason as an independent authority equal to the Scriptures. Rather, his point is that Christian teaching need not be found verbatim in the Scriptures but can be arrived at by rational deduction from the Scriptures (*homoousios* being a case in point—the assertion of the Nicene Creed that Christ is of “one substance” with the Father). Reason, while never in and of itself a warrant for doctrine, is useful—even essential—in the interpretation of the Scriptures.

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Similarly, human experience, while not an independent authority for Christian teaching, is nonetheless indispensable for the task of scriptural interpretation. Scott Hendrix argues persuasively that Luther “joined the interpretation of scripture to the experience and theological orientation of the interpreter.”¹³ Luther’s recollection of his “breakthrough” discovery of the evangelical meaning of Rom 1:17 illustrates well how the context and personal experience of the interpreter can be factors in finding new insight in a familiar text.¹⁴ Elsewhere Hendrix describes this as “tuning oneself to the text” and concludes that “there was for Luther a sense in which Scripture was not fully interpreted until it encountered and illumined the life of the addressee.”¹⁵

Thus, while Luther holds “Scripture alone” as authoritative, the thinking, experiencing human is deeply implicated in the faithful interpretation of the Scriptures. Luther’s encouragement that Christians should read the Bible, rather than commentators, reflects a humanist emphasis on the return to the sources (*ad fontes*). Such intentional study of primary sources requires wrestling with the texts with all the tools available to interpret them, including linguistics, rhetoric, and history. Luther urges Christians to engage the Scriptures of the Old and New Testa-

¹²Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), in *LW* 44:205.

¹³Scott H. Hendrix, “The Interpretation of the Bible according to Luther and the Confessions, or Did Luther Have a (Lutheran) Hermeneutic?” (paper delivered to the ELCA Convocation of Teaching Theologians, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 2003) 5.

¹⁴Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings* (1545), in *LW* 34:336–337.

¹⁵Scott H. Hendrix, “Luther against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 37/3 (July 1983) 235, 236.

ments “so that we might there read and see for ourselves....It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him.”¹⁶

“FOR YOU”

“[T]hese are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

Luther’s conviction that Christians should “see for ourselves” shaped his life’s work as a theologian. Luther translated the Bible into German to make it more accessible for Christians of his day. Having made the Scriptures available, he also worked to make them understandable, providing clear advice about how best to interpret the Scriptures. A crucial text in this regard is Luther’s *Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, written as an introduction to a collection of sermons (the Wartburg Postil). This succinct document (only eight pages in the American Edition of *Luther’s Works*) challenges any inclination to adopt a neutral, objective stance toward the Bible by insisting that when we read the Scriptures, we should expect something; and what we should expect is to receive Jesus Christ “as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own”; for reading or hearing the Scriptures rightly “is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him.”¹⁷ Luther expanded on this work by writing prefaces to each of the books of the Bible, because people need to be “taught what [one] is to look for in this book, so that [one] may not seek laws and commandments where [one] ought to be seeking the gospel and promises of God.”¹⁸

While sound biblical scholarship and diligent study of the Scriptures are necessary, for Luther the appropriation of Christ and his benefits requires God’s own agency. As discussed above, to acknowledge the Bible as the word of God is to acknowledge God as the author who works in and through the authorized texts to achieve God’s purposes. Luther explicitly describes the purpose of the Scriptures as “a means and a vehicle by which one comes to faith and eternal life.”¹⁹ This is accomplished through the active inspiration of the Spirit: “Above all, therefore, one must listen to and read the Word, which is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. When the Word is read, the Holy Spirit is present; and thus it is impossible either to listen to or to read Scripture without profit.”²⁰

Luther’s references to the Scriptures as a means to faith and a vehicle of the

¹⁶Luther, *Brief Instruction*, in *LW* 35:122.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, in *LW* 35:119, 121.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *Preface to the New Testament* (1522), in *LW* 35:357. I have replaced Luther’s use of “he” with “[one].”

¹⁹Martin Luther, *Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John* (1527), in *LW* 30:321. Luther is commenting on 1 John 5:13.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Holy Spirit prefigure the way in which Article V of the *Augsburg Confession* describes word and sacrament as means of grace. This similarity is reinforced by those instances in which Luther explicitly lists the Bible (not just the “word” or the “gospel”) together with baptism and eucharist, thereby including it rhetorically among the means of grace: even in the most desperate times, “Baptism remains, the Eucharist remains, the power of the Keys remains, and the text of the Bible, or Holy Scripture, remains.”²¹ It seems from such references that the Bible, the book itself, can be understood as the physical element to which God’s living and active word joins itself in order to work faith and grace in those who receive it.

Given this parallel, it is perhaps useful to imagine what Luther might have written had he decided to include a section about the Bible in the *Small Catechism*.

What is the Bible?

The Bible is the inspired word of God written for us and for our salvation in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Where is this written?

The apostle writes thus (2 Tim 3:14–17), “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

What gifts or benefits does the Bible grant?

It announces God’s revelation, bringing us knowledge of God’s will and of God’s saving action on our behalf in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the law, it works God’s judgment on sinners, and through the word of promise, it works faith, granting forgiveness of sins, new life, and salvation to those who believe.

How can written words do such great things?

They are not merely written words, but the living word of God made present in and through these words, with the Holy Spirit working faith in and through the word as God wills.

EMBODIED AUTHORITY

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and lived among us,...full of grace and truth.”
(John 1:1, 14)

Much of the discussion of scriptural authority in the past century has been

²¹Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–1539), in *LW* 3:37. See also *LW* 5:43; 23:253; 23:280; 41:207.

framed by the rise of biblical fundamentalism, with its insistence on the literal interpretation and inerrancy of the Bible. On a recent plane trip, the passenger across the aisle noticed that I was reading a book on Lutheran higher education and engaged me in conversation. Eventually this gentleman, a retired education professor from a public university, asked, “How do Lutherans interpret ‘day’ in Genesis 1?” As I began a very basic explanation of the difference between the two creation accounts in Genesis, the young man in the seat ahead, a youth minister with degrees from a Bible college and seminary, turned back to us and began to criticize the historical-critical method because he believed it denied the inspiration of the Bible and gave humans authority over God’s word. Until the twentieth century, he said, people accepted Moses as the writer of the Pentateuch, so why should we change that now?

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This second conversation partner began from the premise that anyone who didn’t share his particular interpretation of the Bible necessarily rejected biblical authority as such. Unfortunately, this is a position that has become all too common even within mainline denominations, where language about “biblical authority” can be used to transform honest disagreements about interpretation into challenges to the fidelity of others.

For my first conversation partner, however, the issue was how the Bible could have credibility in the twenty-first-century world. His worldview as an educator had no room for a perfect book. Yet he showed genuine interest in my suggestion that Gen 1 is best understood as a poetic description of God’s work of creation and that in poetry words function with levels of meaning that are not neatly defined.

One of the significant differences between the sixteenth century and our own is that biblical authority can no longer simply be assumed. In a cultural climate marked by individualism, intrachurch debates about the nature and scope of biblical authority are not likely to engage anyone productively. The church today would do well to follow the example of Luther and the Confessions, whose efforts focused less on defending the status of the Bible than on using the Scriptures, through translation and evangelical interpretation and preaching, for the sake of the church and the world.

The closest thing to a claim of inerrancy in the Lutheran Confessions is a statement in Luther’s *Large Catechism*: “We know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I—in short, all [people]—may err and deceive, but God’s Word cannot err.”²²

²²Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* (1529) IV:57, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 444. The German verb *fehlen* carries the sense of to lack, to fail, or to err; thus Tappert’s translation of *fehlen und trügen* as “err and deceive” is preferable to “deceive and mislead” in the Kolb and Wengert translation (464), since the earlier translation connotes both unintentional and intentional weakness.

Notably, “God’s Word” refers here not to the Scriptures as a whole but specifically to God’s command and promise concerning baptism. Luther’s point is not to assert the fixed authority of a sacred text but to witness to the trustworthiness of God, who has bound God’s self to the word. Lewis Spitz echoes this perspective when he describes Luther’s view of the Scriptures “as the authoritative Word of God, *who cannot err.*”²³

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A doctrine of inspiration that focuses primarily on what the Holy Spirit did centuries ago, in the writing and transmission of the biblical texts, is too limited an understanding of God’s agency. For Luther and the Confessions, inspiration is inseparable from the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith; it refers to what the Spirit does here and now, working through the texts of the Holy Scriptures and working within the community of believers.

The task of the Christian church is to witness to how the Triune God is at work in the world and to demonstrate the trustworthiness of this biblical God. The Bible is foundational for this task, but just as Luther translated Hebrew and Greek into German, so the church is called to translate the biblical message into new idioms so that people today can hear God’s word persuasively in their own lives. Luther presents a powerful and memorable image of the Scriptures as “the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies.”²⁴ Perhaps less well known is that Luther also describes “the gathering of the Christian people” as a “manger” where “Christ is placed before us.”²⁵ The external preaching of the word is an essential part of the Lutheran hermeneutic. As Luther observes, “Christ...called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.”²⁶

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in its ordination liturgy, confesses that “the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life” and asks the ordinand to “preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures” and with the Lutheran Confessions as “true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures.” What is striking is not the affirmation of scriptural authority but the explicit delegation of divine authority to the newly

²³Lewis W. Spitz Sr., “Luther’s *Sola Scriptura*,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 (Dec 1960) 743, emphasis added.

²⁴Martin Luther, *Preface to the Old Testament* (1545), in *LW* 35:236.

²⁵Martin Luther, *The Gospel for Christmas Eve, Luke 2* (1522), in *LW* 52:22.

²⁶Luther, *Brief Instruction*, in *LW* 35:123. See also Luther’s description of the church as “a mouth-house, not a pen-house” in the *Adventspostille* (1522), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10/1/2 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1969) 48.

ordained, who “has Christ’s authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, serving God’s people.”²⁷

On the one hand, we are subject to the authority of the Scriptures; like Luther, our consciences are captive to the word of God. At the same time, however, we have been given tremendous freedom and responsibility to be authorized agents of God’s word in God’s world. This is true not only for rostered leaders but for all Christians. Luther describes all Christians as “priests”²⁸ with the responsibility to share God’s word with others and even to serve as “Christs to one another.”²⁹

The word of God is consistently entrusted to earthen vessels. The christological decisions of the early church attest to the truth that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Likewise, we assert that in the Eucharist the true body and blood of Christ are present in, with, and under the earthly elements of bread and wine. Similarly, it is no contradiction to affirm that the Bible is the word of God in, with, and under human words and that the living word of God is present not only in the Scriptures but in our spoken proclamation.

Luther privileges John’s Gospel among other New Testament writings for its emphasis on the life-giving words of Christ. The Gospel appointed for Reformation Sunday reminds the church of the importance of continuing this witness:

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31–32) ⊕

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²⁷“Ordination,” in *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 194, 198.

²⁸Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *LW* 31:355.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 368.